

# Reflection of Humanistic Thought in the Philosophy of Swami Vivekananda

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**Abstract:** Swami Vivekananda was very much influenced by the philosophy of Advaita Vedanta and regards reality as one and absolute. His whole philosophical thinking is based on Upanishads and Vedanta philosophy. The main aim of his philosophy is to establish the essential unity exist within the things and beings of this universe. According to him, man has the capacity to acquire a ideal living by applying the teachings of Vedanta. In this regard, Vivekananda has given an analysis about the nature of man. By distinguishing between the apparent man and the real man, Vivekananda mainly tries to underline how the spiritual is different from the empirical. Moreover, the spirituality of human being signifies its capability of self-realization. Swami Vivekananda mainly emphasis on the spirituality of man though the apparent aspect of man is capable of being spiritualized.

**Key words:** Absolute, spiritual, empirical, self-realization.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Humanism is a philosophical doctrine which gives prime importance to human being and its value. Human being has a unique social and moral value. The concept of humanism has been analyzed by various contemporary Indian philosophers, like, M. K. Gandhi, M.N. Roy, Rabindranath Tagore and so on. Swami Vivekananda is also one of them who have described elaborately about the concept of Humanism. Swami Vivekananda was very much influenced by the philosophy of Advaita Vedanta and regards reality as one and absolute. His whole philosophical thinking is based on Upanishads and Vedanta philosophy. The main aim of his philosophy is to establish the essential unity exist within the things and beings of this universe. According to him, man has the capacity to acquire a ideal living by applying the teachings of Vedanta. In this regard, Vivekananda has given an analysis about the nature of man. His analysis about the nature of man lies in the religious theory of animism. Vivekananda thought that this theory provides a very clear understanding of the primitive

people's search for the real nature of man. According to the theory of Animism, at the primitive age the experience of dream, consciousness and death makes people believe that the real man is not the man who is seen moving and living. This believes makes man think about beyond the physical or bodily aspect.

The Katha Upanisad begins with the inquiry: when a man dies there is a dispute. One party declares that he has gone forever; the other insists that he is still living, which is true? He himself tries to answer the question by saying, "Two positions remain to mankind. One is to believe with the nihilists that all is nothing, that we know nothing, that we can never know anything either about future, the past or even the present... Then there is the other position- to seek for an explanation, to seek for the real...In this body which is an aggregate of molecules of matter, is there anything which is real?"<sup>1</sup>

According to Vivekananda, man is a spirit. The nature of man is spiritual. The word spirit has both positive and negative implication. Negatively speaking, man is a spirit means it can never be empirical. Positively, man is spiritual in the sense that it possesses some aspirations and urges which only he is capable of having. Therefore, he stated that there are two aspects of human nature. One is the apparent man and other is the real or spiritual man. By distinguishing between the apparent man and the real man, Vivekananda mainly tries to underline how the spiritual is different from the empirical. Moreover, the spirituality of human being signifies its capability of self-realization. Swami Vivekananda mainly emphasis on the spirituality of man though the apparent aspect of man is capable of being spiritualized.

### 1.1. The apparent Nature of Man:

In the philosophy of Swami Vivekananda, man is described as the union of both apparent and spiritual aspects. The aim of every human being is to realize his spiritually. This always presupposes the fact that

there is something which is different from the spiritual nature of man. That is the bodily or physical aspect of man.

The picture of man that emerges in the philosophy of Vivekananda is an organized unity of the physical and the spiritual. Vivekananda never undermines the importance of the physical nature of man. The very fact that man is always asked to awaken his spirituality presupposes that there is a side of man that is somewhat different from and yet akin to his spiritual nature. That is his physical nature.<sup>2</sup>

According to Vivekananda, the apparent nature of man includes the bodily, the biological and psychological aspects of human nature. The body itself represents the physical nature of human being. Vivekananda also refers to the subtle body and to some other bodily centers that are talked about in Tantra Vidya, but the physical nature of man can be clearly apprehended even if the structure, function and the importance of the gross Body are clearly understood.<sup>3</sup>

Vivekananda believes that the physical capacity of human being is superior to other beings. Man has the brain system and the presents it in the body differentiates man from other features and gives him a unique status in the world.

Not that he possesses greater strength than other animals, in strength and sheer brute force many animals are more powerful than man, many animals possess keener sense than man; even so, man is physically superior to them all because his physical nature is better organized and exhibits a greater Unity. His responses to the environmental factors are not just instinctive or mechanical, he is not merely a body of reactions, even his physical behavior generally follows a plan and a pattern.<sup>4</sup>

## 1.2. The Real Nature of Man:

According to Vivekananda, there is a real aspect of the nature of man which is completely opposite to the material body. The real nature of human being gives the capacity to go beyond the physical nature. That real nature of man is described by the Vivekananda in terms of Atman or the Soul force. Vivekananda was very much influenced by the teaching of Bhagabad Gita regarding the nature of Atman. There are two important characteristics of Atman. First one is that the real nature of man or the Atman is identical with Divine nature or the Absolute. The second is that it is not possible for

human being to describe the nature of this spiritual aspect of man in ordinary language.

As a Vedantist, Vivekananda identifies the real nature of Atman with Brahman. For him, the two are basically one. Soul or Atman is the expression or manifestation of the Absolute or Brahman. Vivekananda thought that though Brahman and Atman are identical in nature, there are some apparent differences between them. The soul or Atman appears as manifold because of which many philosophers never accept Atman and Brahman as identical. Vivekananda tries to explain that though souls or Atman are manifold but it is very much identical with the nature of Brahman. For example: if we look at the waves of sea different weaves appear as different but in reality they are all one. Vivekananda says that the nature of Atman is eternally pure, perfect and unchangeable.

Vivekananda explain the difference between the apparent nature and the real nature of soul in various ways. He stated that though there is diversity in the apparent nature of soul but it does not affect the real nature of soul. The soul is really one which comprehends all. In this regard, he has given an example by adopting the Vedantic analogy of 'Pratibimba' that is-

Vivekananda says that the same sun may shine in its reflections on water kept in different pots, but the different reflections are only apparent- 'reflections' of the sun, the real sun is always the one. There is, therefore, but one Atman, one self, eternally pure, eternally perfect, unchangeable, and unchanged; it has never changed; and all these various changes in the universe are but appearances in that one self.<sup>5</sup>

Vivekananda stated that though we are generally not aware about the identity of Atman with the Absolute, but there are some experiences or realization that we have faced in different time which make us able the realize this identity. We often face many problems in our life and tries to taking out ourselves from those problems. This will make us realize that we are capable of facing the problems. This proves that we have a Divine power or soul which is very much identical with Brahman or Absolute.

Vivekananda thought that the existence of Atman within human body is the evidence of his Divine nature. Man has the capacity to go beyond what is apparent and can realize his Divine nature. This capability of self-transcendence is itself an evidence of the basic oneness of Atman and Brahman. But Vivekananda holds that it is not easy task to

comprehend this identity for the human being because our mental capabilities, our consciousness with the mind-body mechanism and our embodied existence are not enough to understand the real aspect of the nature of man. We only try to seek to understand the real aspect of man's nature through various spiritual pursuits.

Here, a question may be raised- if the Soul or Atman is identical with Brahman then why do we have experienced of the plurality of soul? Regarding this question, Vivekananda tries to give a Vedantic solution. He asserts that the plurality of soul and the apparent experiences of birth and death of soul are not real; these are only apparent. In reality, the one Atman neither comes nor goes; it is neither born nor dies. The plurality of Atman is an illusion. Therefore, the nature of Atman is similar to the nature of Brahman.

Moreover Vivekananda, unlike to Vedanta, stated that the finite aspect of man should not be treated as completely false. The finite aspect makes man to think about beyond himself. So, finite or apparent aspect also includes some aspects of reality within it. We cannot regard it as totally illusion.

## 2. FREEDOM, EQUALITY AND FRATERNITY

The concept of freedom, equality and fraternity are closely related to Vivekananda's concept of humanism. Humanism directly or indirectly indicates the equality and the attitude of fraternity in society. Vivekananda stated that the real nature of man is freedom. Freedom is not the quality of man; rather, it is the very essence of real nature of man. In this sense, freedom is not which belongs to soul but the soul is freedom.

The faith of Vivekananda in the inherent Divinity of individual made him keep society at an arm's length from the individual. The individual would serve the society and become one with it not because of social compulsion but because of his innate urge for promoting social good as an ethical self-obligation. The supreme end of individual is freedom and he expends his freedom by promoting the freedom of others.<sup>6</sup>

According to Vivekananda, freedom of man does not mean 'no-determination. It means self-determination. Man is free to do anything. So he is the maker of his own destiny. Free agent is not determined by anything else but he himself. Therefore, the destiny of man is determined by his

own action. But it does not imply that man's action or karma contradict man's freedom.

Swami Vivekananda stated that the concept of liberty helps us to remove all that shackles which hinder the manifestation of the real nature of man. These shackles are occurs because of our ignorance which leads to inequality. By the term 'liberty' Vivekananda refers to a system of positive opportunities and rights, such as, 'right to use one's intelligence', 'rights to use one's own body', 'rights to freedom of movements', 'freedom of thought and expression' and 'freedom to use one's wealth'. The relation between these two 'liberty' and 'equality' is mainly based on the teaching of Vedanta about the equality of all beings. Vivekananda stated that when we can realize that everything is same and one reality then only we are called free in a true sense.

The liberty without equality is no liberty, is proved in the capitalist countries with formal democracy, that equality without liberty is no equality, is proved today in the socialist states, where there is a cry for liberty and democracy. Fraternity, in the Vedanta viewpoint, signifies the inner oneness of all. Vivekananda, superseding the idea of universal brotherhood by universal selfhood, had given the idea of fraternity a high position. For him, fraternity is the rationalistic way of life- the Dharma. A fully enlightened person feels ones one with the entire humanity and therefore international cooperation is a part of his Dharma.<sup>7</sup>

## 3. DARIDRA- NARAYANA

According to Vivekananda, man has the Divinity in himself. The real nature of man is identical with Absolute. For him, man is the God or Narayana. Therefore, we should respect every human being, even the poor. Generally in our society we have seen that poor people are not given respect at all. But Vivekananda stated that all men are one. Though apparently men are looked different from each other but the true nature of man is same. The divinity presents in all men are one. Vivekananda stated that we should serve the poor people which become a true service to God. He often used the word, Daridranaraya .means see God in poor man. Poor people are the image of God. In other words we can say that God manifest himself in poor man.

Vivekananda says, I have lost all wish for my salvation. I never wanted earthly enjoyments. I must see any machine in strong working order, and then knowing sure that I have put in a lever for the good

of humanity, in India at least, which no power can drive back, I will sleep, without caring what will be next; and my I will be born again and again, and suffer thousands of miseries so that I may worship the only God that exists, the only God I believe in, the total of all souls- and, above all, my God the miserable, my God the poor of all races, of all species, is the special object of my worship.<sup>8</sup>

This concept of Vivekananda can be compared with Mahatma Gandhi's concept of 'Harijan' which means the people of God. Harijan is also known as Dalit. Gandhi always struggled for humanity and human dignity.

#### 4. STREES ON SEVA

Swami Vivekananda emphasizes on stree on seva or service for human well-being. He recognized human agency as the main instrument which ensure the human well-being. He believes that human being is responsible for what they want to be because man has the power to make themselves through their actions. Therefore, Vivekananda always advise to take up our activities for the service for needy human being. Swami Vivekananda stated that service and spirituality cannot be separated from each other. He recognized that service to the needy people itself is the service to God. He has spiritualized the concept of service as the duty towards God because, for him, man is identical with the Absolute or Brahman. The very nature of man is identical with the nature of Absolute. The Divinity present in all man is the evidence of this identity. So service for man is turned itself to the service to God. In this regard Vivekananda stated that we should feel very lucky to have the opportunity to serve the needy people because God think us capable of serving Him through the human being because of which He gave us the opportunity.

He says, 'To help others is to help one's self.' Vivekananda's notion of service was ultimately spiritualized as a duty towards God, because every individual, for him, was embodiment of God and God cannot be helped out of sympathy, but only served out of a sense of love. He proclaimed, "You cannot help anyone, you can only serve....if you have the privilege... As man service was service to God, the giver of service should feel blessed in getting an opportunity to serve". Swami Vivekananda said, "Let the giver kneel and give

thanks, let the receiver stand up and permit." This was his distinct service.<sup>9</sup>

#### 5. IMMORALITY OF SOUL

Vivekananda stated that the soul of human being is totally free. He has the freedom. But in our experience we always found the soul in bondage. This bondage is only apparent. But the explanation about the freedom of soul is difficult to understand for man as we usually experienced the soul as suffering individual. This experience makes man think of the ultimate goal of human life that is the attainment of liberation. In this regard, Vivekananda stated that, the nature of our Soul is freedom and realization of this real nature of our soul is itself means the attainment of liberation.

The soul of man is immortal. Literally the word 'immortality' refers to deathlessness. So, the immortality of the soul means death is not the end of human soul. It remains after the death of the physical body of man. Vivekananda accepts this meaning of immortality and has explained on the basis of Vedanta philosophy.

In Vivekananda's thought, rebirth is an aspect of immortality and ultimate realization of immortality would mean finally getting out only of this world but also of the cycle of birth and rebirths.<sup>10</sup>

Therefore, according to Vivekananda, there are two aspects of immortality. First one is the survival and second is the immortality itself. Survival, for Vivekananda, means death is not the end of life. After the destruction of the body the soul re-entered into another body in order to enjoy the fruits of his actions that is done by in present time. But Vivekananda stated that the aim of man is to attain freedom. This destiny or the immortality of soul can be attained only when the cycle of birth and death remain stop.

So, immortality of soul is prize to won. Vivekananda stated that in order to realize the immortality of soul we should have to accept firstly that soul is immortal. For the realization of immortality the soul has to grow and evolve.

#### 6. FOUR BASIC CONCEPTS OF VIVEKANANDA'S HUMANISM:

There are various concepts that we have found in the philosophy of Swami Vivekananda which make us understand the humanism of Vivekananda. Four such fundamental concepts regarding Humanism are discussed bellow-

#### 6.1. Divinity of Man:

Vivekananda stated that every human being possesses a divine element within himself. This Divinity is the true nature of man. Apparently we have seen various differences among human beings but essentially all men are one because of its Divine nature. But this oneness of man or the Divinity of man cannot be realized by the man because of his ignorance. When man can get true knowledge about the real nature of man then he can be able to realize his oneness to everything.

Vivekananda says, "Each soul potentially divine." The divine power is already embodied in human mind. But it is covered by ignorance. Ignorance makes us hate each other.<sup>11</sup>

#### 6.2. Universal Acceptance and Tolerance:

Swami Vivekananda's concept of Humanism mainly tries to establish a universal brotherhood among human being. He stated that the feeling of acceptance and tolerance is very important to establish humanism in society. We should have the attitude of acceptance and tolerance towards different religions of the world. Different religions have different beliefs and practices. For Vivekananda, we should respect all those religions.

Swami Vivekananda's concept of Acceptance and tolerance also represents his concept of Ahimsa or Non-Violence. He stated that we should not hurt anyone in the world. Rather, we should give love to all beings. But if we are not able to do good for others then we have not any right to hurt them. In Vivekananda's word,

Do well if you can, but do not injure the world. He further says, "The idea is not to eat flesh, not to injure any being, for all animals are my brothers. If you can think of them as your brother, you have made a little headway towards the brotherhood of all souls..."<sup>12</sup>

#### 6.3. Universal Religion:

Vivekananda stated that religion is necessary for human life. Religion is a growth within human being. As a Vedantist, Vivekananda believes that there is a unity among all religions. Though all are different apparent. All religions talk about same reality. Therefore, he introduced the concept of universal religion which helps us to realize the oneness present in all religion.

By universal religion, Vivekananda mainly tries to universalized religion. He stated that a universal religion must satisfy two main conditions. Firstly, it

must open its gate to every individual where he or she can realize that no one is born with this or that religion. In this sense, by individualizing religion we really universalize it. Secondly, a universal religion must be able to give satisfaction and comfort to every mankind.

There is one common point of belief present in all religion that is belief in God. Though different religions talk about different truth, but they are the aspects of the same truth which is one. Like Gandhi, Vivekananda also believes that truth is God and realization of that one unity or God represents the ideal of Universal religion. By the word 'Universal religion', Vivekananda never mean any new religion with new mythology. Rather, it is a new approach to religion which can give a common platform where all the existing religions can exercise their religion.

Universal religion as Vivekananda perceives is a discovery of universality in all religion.<sup>13</sup>

Another characteristic of Universal religion is that it should be acceptable to all minds. It has to satisfy the largest possible proportion of mankind. Therefore, it must be able to supply a satisfaction to all the various types of mind. In this regard Vivekananda stated that the ideal religion must harmoniously balance all the aspects of religion, namely- philosophy, emotion, work and mysticism.

#### 6.4. The concept of Yoga:

According to Vivekananda, if someone believes in the notion of Universal religion then he has to be broad-minded and open hearted. So, the followers of universal religion should have the knowledge of scriptures of all religion and should have acquire a clear understanding about the beliefs and practices that are include within different religions. This attitude towards religion is the essence of world religion.

The main aim of Yoga is the realization of oneness. According to Vivekananda, everything in this universe is nothing but the manifestation of God. So, we can find God anywhere. In this regard, swami Vivekananda said, in his lecture on "What is religion?", that

Let us be no more the worshipers of creeds or sects with small limited notions of God, but see Him in everything in the universe. If you are a knower of God, you will everywhere find the same worship as in your own heart.<sup>14</sup>

## 7. UNIQUENESS OF VIVEKANANDA'S HUMANISM

The concept of humanism that was advocated by Swami Vivekananda is Universal in nature. His humanism is something more than human because his humanism is derived from the ever present and inalienable divine spark in all human being, which is the uniqueness of his humanism. Vivekananda stated that the knowledge and strength of human being can be either destructive or constructive. That means man can give love, joy, happiness to him or his fellow beings or can give hatred, sorrow, death etc. This depends upon one's spiritual development, the consciousness level primarily and on his social and economical environment secondarily.

Vivekananda said that when our consciousness functions at the level of ego then we get only tension and sorrow around ourselves. But if our consciousness functions from the very deepest level of our divinity then we find happiness, peace, love everywhere. Vivekananda established a humanism that is founded in the Divine and his power. He tries to give universality in his humanism with a positive energy.

The Divinity of man, freedom, love for others, service to humanity, self confidence, truth, absence of jealousy and selfishness, sacrifice, renunciation, charity, dedication, strength, humanity- these are the ideas of Swami Vivekananda's man making humanism.<sup>15</sup>

Swami Vivekananda's humanism can be regarded as the spiritualistic humanism. His humanism regards human being as God. He stated that man is the highest being in this greatest world. Therefore, we should not think of another God accept human being. Man is the only God.

Swami Vivekananda's concept of Practical Vedanta is also an important and useful concept which represents his humanistic philosophy or humanism. The practical aspects of Vedanta philosophy which are discussed by Swami Vivekananda is known as his concept of Neo-Vedanta or Practical Vedanta. In practical Vedanta, Vivekananda mainly tries to show the identity of Brahman with Atman. But unlike Vedanta philosophy, Vivekanda accepts the reality of this world.

Vivekananda stated that people of the present time are very much selfish and Vedanta is very much useful as it gives a basis for the altruistic ideal of morality. So, if we try to understand and follow Vedantic wisdom, that is the oneness of reality, then

only the problem of inequality or disharmony would not arise at all.

## 8. CONCLUSION

Swami Vivekananda was a great intellectual and spiritual personality of the country who makes his philosophy universalistic. His philosophy of humanism is also a harmonious development of all side of the individual's life. According to the humanism, man is the central being in the world. Humanism never believes in the existence of God. Vivekananda's humanism also advocates this idea of humanism. His humanism advocates that service to man is the service to God. This idea of Vivekananda's humanism is mainly based on the Vedantic vision of man which is identical with Brahman. In this regard, he said, "Jiva prem kare jei jan sei jan Sebiche Isvara."<sup>16</sup>

Swami Vivekananda mainly emphasizes on love, freedom, quality, universal acceptance and tolerance as the key concept of his humanism. Swami Vivekananda's philosophy may be regarded as the Vedantic Humanism because it is concerned with the suffering of human being and rooted on Vedanta philosophy. This Vedantic humanism admits universality of religion. Therefore, Vivekananda's Vedantic humanism brings a message to the humanity that we should give love and respect to all the human being for the establishment of world peace and universal brotherhood.

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